The Beginnings of Civilization

Biography

Marcel Ravidat
1923–1995

WHY HE MADE HISTORY Marcel Ravidat and three friends discovered some of the world’s oldest known paintings in southwestern France in 1940. Ravidat’s curiosity led him into a cave whose walls and ceiling were covered with prehistoric artwork of animals of all kinds. The Lascaux Cave art represents one of the most important archaeological finds of the twentieth century.

As you read the biography below, think about how Marcel Ravidat’s inquisitiveness and sense of adventure established a valuable link with the past.

Their outing that day, September 12, 1940, probably seemed no different to 17-year-old Marcel Ravidat than any other. His dog Robot ran ahead, sometimes chasing a rabbit, other times just tracking a scent. Marcel followed, enjoying the familiar countryside near the village of Montignac. The next thing Marcel knew, Robot had fallen into a hole and was stuck there. As he pulled his dog out, Marcel heard stones tumbling downward and then an echo as they hit rock at the bottom. Robot had stumbled into an opening in the ground, and it seemed to lead somewhere.

This was something to explore, and Marcel wasted no time getting the equipment he needed. He hurried home to get ropes and a pick axe or two. He grabbed a makeshift lamp he had made at the garage where he worked. On his way back he encountered three friends—Jacques Marsal, Georges Agnel, and Simon Coencas. When he told them what he had found, they wanted to participate in the adventure.

Marcel had no trouble relocating the place where Robot had been stuck. It looked as if the hole had opened up by the falling of a large tree. The boys used the tools to make the opening large enough to slip through. Marcel went in first, then encouraged the others to follow.

They had discovered an entrance to a cave. Using the lamp to get their bearings, they followed a narrow passageway into a larger space. As the lamplight struck the walls, the boys looked in disbelief. Drawings of yellow horses, red cows, black stags, and more animals came into view out of the darkness and extended across the rock. The boys gazed in awe at the...
The beauty of the paintings impressed Marcel and his friends. They guessed that they had been hidden from view for a very long time. Marcel suggested at first that they keep their discovery to themselves, but word of the cave paintings spread. People from the village of Montignac wanted to see what the boys had discovered. Anthropologists and archaeologists came to do research, and visitors from all over the world crowded into the underground gallery. Opening the cave to visitors changed its delicately balanced atmosphere, and mold began to grow on the walls. Concern grew about how best to protect and preserve the prehistoric paintings, and the cave was finally closed in 1963. Today, the beautiful paintings of Lascaux Cave, which Marcel Ravidat and his friends first saw in the flicker of lamplight, are again hidden from public view.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall**  How did Marcel Ravidat and his friends discover the paintings in Lascaux Cave?

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2. **Draw Conclusions**  How do you think that closing Lascaux Cave would help preserve the prehistoric art on its walls?

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**ACTIVITY**

Suppose that you are one of Marcel Ravidat’s friends. Using information from the biography, write a diary entry that describes what happened September 12, 1940, what you thought or felt about it, and whether you think you should keep it secret or share it with others. Write your diary entry on a separate piece of paper.